

# *Dealing with the Past Intergroup Violence*

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## **Abstract**

In intergroup conflicts, dealing with the past is essential for reconciliation. Peoples' tendencies to blame each other for the past ingroup suffering by outgroup can cause a considerable challenge for reconciliation. Alternatively, if people show forgiving attitudes toward outgroups for inflicting ingroup suffering, intergroup relations can improve. This study analyzed how rival group members react when discussing past intergroup violence. The study is based on structured dialogue meetings with Albanian and Serbian participants in Kosovo. Using Braun and Clarke's guide for data analysis, the results showed that rival group members emphasize mainly the events when the ingroup have suffered while neglecting the events when the outgroup have suffered. The study found that people use various strategies to deny or justify past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. Forgiveness, apology, blaming the other, collective responsibility and ingroup shame, are themes that have emerged when rival groups discussed past intergroup violence. We discuss the implications of these themes for intergroup relations in Kosovo.

**Keywords:** *dealing with the past, forgiveness, apology, ingroup shame.*

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## ***Introduction***

In Kosovo, during the period of 1998 and 1999, Serbian forces killed at least 10.000 Kosovo Albanians and forcibly displaced out of homes more than 800.000 Kosovo Albanians<sup>1</sup>. In order to stop the violence exercised toward Kosovo Albanians, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) initiated air strikes campaign against Serbian military groups in the period March – June 1999. The violent conflict between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo ended in June 1999. In the aftermath of the conflict, the Serbian community in Kosovo was the target of murders, repeated threats and various forms of abuse. As a result of violence, about 200.000 Serbs have been displaced out of their homes<sup>2</sup>.

In post-conflict societies of past mutual suffering inflicted on each other, rival groups hold divergent interpretations about past intergroup violence<sup>3</sup>. Both groups in conflict tend to justify the exercise of violence toward the outgroup by portraying the violence as a self-protective response from the outgroup harm. This is done by minimizing the effects of in-group violence toward outgroup and maximizing the effects of the outgroup violence toward ingroup<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, both groups reject the

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Judah, *What Everyone Needs to Know*. (Canada: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Internally Displaced Monitoring Centre, *IDPs still seeking housing solutions and documentation to access their rights*. (Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2009), 295.

<sup>3</sup> Masi Noor, Rupert Brown and Garry Prentice. "Precursors and mediators of intergroup reconciliation in Northern Ireland: A new model." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 47, (2008): 481–495.

<sup>4</sup> Johanna R. Vollhardt. "Collective victimization," In *The Oxford handbook of intergroup conflict* ed. Linda R. Tropp, 136-157 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

possibility to acknowledge past ingroup violence toward the outgroup, which in turn impedes intergroup reconciliation<sup>5</sup>.

From the social identity perspective, is it comprehensible why groups tend to minimize or reject past ingroup violence effects toward the outgroup<sup>6</sup>. According to social identity perspective, individuals are motivated to maintain a positive evaluation of their group<sup>7</sup>. Because acknowledging past ingroup violence toward the outgroup may undermine positive evaluation of their group, such as threaten group's moral image, individuals employ various strategies, such as justifying or denying past ingroup violence, in order to undermine threats of group's moral image<sup>8</sup>.

In this study, our aim was to investigate rival group members' reactions when discussing past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. First, what is people's focus when discussing past intergroup violence? Second, what is people's reactions when engaging in discussion about past intergroup violence? To investigate these issues, we analyzed the content of three structured dialogue meetings among Albanian and Serbian participants from Kosovo.

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<sup>5</sup> Sabina Cehajic and Rupert Brown. "Silencing the past: Effects of intergroup contact on acknowledgment of ingroup responsibility." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1, no. 2, (2010): 190-196.

<sup>6</sup> Noor, Brown and Prentice, Precursors and mediators of intergroup reconciliation in Northern Ireland: A new model (see footnote 3).

<sup>7</sup> Henry Tajfel and Jonathan Turner. "An integrative theory of social conflict," In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* eds. William G. Austin, Stephen Worchel (Brooks/Cole: Monterey, 1979). 33-47

<sup>8</sup> Sabina Cehajic, Rupert Brown and Emanuele Castano. "Forgive and forget? Antecedents and consequences of intergroup forgiveness in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Political Psychology* 29, (2008): 351-367.

## *Dealing with the Past Intergroup Violence*

Dealing with the past intergroup violence is an essential element of intergroup relations<sup>9</sup>. If groups tend to deny or justify violence by ingroup members toward the outgroup, it is unlikely to improve intergroup relations<sup>10</sup>. On contrary, acknowledging past ingroup violence toward the outgroup may facilitate intergroup relations for several reasons<sup>11</sup>. First, groups that suffer as a result of violence from another group have a pressing need for recognition of their suffering<sup>12</sup>. Second, acknowledging past ingroup violence toward outgroup constitutes a necessary condition for other psychological experiences that may improve intergroup relations<sup>13</sup>. For instance, acknowledging past ingroup violence toward the outgroup generates outgroup empathy and increases the perception of ingroup responsibility<sup>14</sup>. Acknowledging past ingroup violence toward the outgroup may pave the way for an apology-forgiveness cycle which is important for intergroup reconciliation<sup>15</sup>. Past studies have shown the beneficial effects of acknowledging past in-group

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Noor, Brown and Prentice, Precursors and mediators of intergroup reconciliation in Northern Ireland: A new model (see footnote 3).

<sup>11</sup> Sabina Cehajic and Rupert Brown. "Not in my name: A social psychological study of antecedents and consequences of acknowledge ment of ingroup atrocities." *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 3(2), (2008): 195-212.

<sup>12</sup> Nurit Shnabel et al. "Promoting reconciliation through satisfaction of the emotional needs of victimized and perpetrating group members: the needs based model of reconciliation." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35(8), (2009): 1021-1030.

<sup>13</sup> Sabina Cehajic, Rupert Brown and Roberto Gonzalez. "What do I care? Perceived ingroup responsibility and dehumanization as redictors of empathy felt for the victim group." *Group processes and Intergroup Relations*, 12(6), (2009): 715-729.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Shnabel et al., Promoting reconciliation through satisfaction of the emotional needs of victimized and perpetrating group members: the needs based model of reconciliation (see footnote 12).

violence toward the outgroup<sup>16</sup>. But little has been done on what actually happens when rival group members meet and discuss regarding the past intergroup violence. In this study, we explored how people react when rival group members meet and discuss regarding the past intergroup violence.

### ***Structured Dialogue Meetings between Albanians and Serbs***

This study is based on dialogue meetings between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo held between 2006 and 2008. For this study, we have analyzed three dialogue meetings. The dialogue meetings were organized as part of the project with the purpose of facilitating the return of displaced Serbs to their properties. Therefore, Albanian and Serbian participants used to be neighbors before the end of the conflict in 1999. In this project, our responsibilities were to coordinate, supervise and report on the project activities.

Each dialogue meeting lasted for two and a half days. Dialogue meetings consisted of ten sessions with very little intervention by the facilitator. There were about 15-20 participants per each meeting, with an almost equal number of Albanian and Serbian participants. The meetings were facilitated by an international facilitator with extensive experience in the Balkan region. Generally, participants in the meetings were instructed to work in smaller mixed (Albanian and Serbian) groups and discuss how conflict affects their lives. Then, they also discussed during the plenary sessions consisted of all participants.

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<sup>16</sup> Cehajic and Brown, Not in my name: A social psychological study of antecedents and consequences of acknowledgment of ingroup atrocities (see footnote 11).

## **Data Analysis**

During the plenary sessions, we took notes in written form. All notes were translated into English language. This analysis is based on full transcriptions of plenary sessions from three dialogue meetings between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. The data analysis is based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide for data analysis<sup>17</sup>. First, we have coded data using theory led approach. This approach allowed us to focus on specific textual material related to the research questions posed for this study (Howitt, 2010)<sup>18</sup>. Second, the coded data were categorized into particular groups. Categorizing data into particular groups allowed us to define and label themes. Each theme was put in a form of a table in the paper. Third, data and themes were constantly reviewed.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data. A theme is something important about the data in relation to the research questions. For this analysis, we have identified and analyzed the data related to rival groups' focus and reactions when talking about past intergroup violence. The following section describes research results substantiated with participants' comments.

## **Results**

*What is people's focus when discussing past intergroup violence?*

When discussing the past intergroup violence, Albanian and Serbian participants tend to emphasize mainly the events at certain time periods, only when their group suffered as a result

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<sup>17</sup> Braun Virginia and Clarke Virginia. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), (2010): 77-101.

<sup>18</sup> Denis Howitt, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology*. (London, United Kingdom: Pearson, 2010).

of outgroup violence. Albanian participants focus on the violence committed by Serbs toward Albanians, mainly during 1998 and 1999, while Serbian participants focus on the violence committed by Albanians after the period of 1999. On discussing the period during 1999, Albanian participant emphasized:

*Since I had the chance to return immediately after the war and to see how has been the situation in the village, the first person I met in his house has been Mr. xxx, and when I've returned I've seen a real terror and of course he remembers that when I've asked about the house and he answered that your house has been burnt three days ago (Alban, Albanian, male)<sup>19</sup>.*

And Serbian participant focus after a period of 1999:

*It is the reality that Serbs live in collective centers in very poor conditions, after 9 years they haven't been able to return to their properties and haven't been integrated into their living places. They live in very hard conditions; it is the reality that usurped Serbian properties still are not handed back. These are things which should be paid attention to and no matter what is the economic situation we want to return to our properties (Zorana, Serbian, female)*

*What are people's reactions when discussing past intergroup violence?* When discussing past intergroup violence participants' answers fell into seven categories: avoidance, justification, forgiveness, apology, blaming the other, collective responsibility and ingroup shame.

*Avoidance.* One of the common reactions of the participants related to the past intergroup violence is by forgetting the past intergroup violence and looking toward the future. This form of the reaction was noticed both among Albanian and Serbian participants. For instance, one participant noted:

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<sup>19</sup> All names given here are pseudonyms.

*Therefore I agree to let the past on the history and we should try constructively to solve our issues (Aleksandar, Serbian, male)*

In a similar manner, another participant noted:

*I am sure that if we go back to the past we cannot move forward, we should look toward future, now Kosova is in new reality, has declared independence and co-citizens who want to return should accept this reality and adopt in it (Blin, Albanian, male) Justification.*

When not avoiding discussion about past intergroup violence, Albanian and Serbian participants, as described above, mainly emphasize ingroup suffering experiences as a result of outgroup violence while undermining outgroup suffering experiences as a result of ingroup violence. Albanian and Serbian participants undermine outgroup suffering experiences by using different strategies to justify past ingroup violence.

For instance, Albanian participants react by minimizing the consequences of in-group violence toward the outgroup while maximizing the consequences of the outgroup violence toward the ingroup. For instance, one participant responded:

*It is true that their houses were burnt, but there is a difference between the burning of houses of Albanians and Serbs, we cannot equalize the same, since the Albanian houses were systematically burnt and organized by Serbian state in order never to return to our homes, whereas Serbian houses were burnt as a result of Albanian frustration, which is not good. Therefor in this context, I wanted to say that I cannot accept the burning of houses of Albanians and Serbs as equal (Alban, Albanian, male)*

Albanian participants also use the discourse of victimhood. In this respect, Albanian participants do not minimize consequences of past ingroup violence toward Serbs, but legitimize past ingroup violence, as shown in this example:



*It is not the same as a victim as a criminal. Let's take my village, Mr. xxx knows that we have 18 co-villagers who have been killed during the war, 16 members belong to one family whereas to Serbian community only houses had been burnt, we are building the houses now and make the return happen, whereas the dead people cannot come back. There are 165 war victims from our municipality (Blin, Albanian, male)*

When justifying past ingroup violence toward Albanians, Serbian participants react by focusing on mutual violence. For instance, one participant said:

*It is true that during 1999 there have been paramilitary groups. We've heard details from xxx, but to answer to xxx with a question, when asked who the local Serbs that burnt the houses were, but I can ask the same who burnt the Serbian houses after 1999. We all know well that orthodox graveyard in Miradi e Eperme is destroyed. There is no monument left there. So when xxx goes to his house should openly say about things that happened to both sides, why the Serbian graveyards were destroyed and who did it, local Albanians or someone else. I don't want to justify any side who committed evil things. I believe that security forces will do its work to catch the responsible ones and punish them (Dragan, Serbian, male)*

*Forgiveness.* Albanian participants explicitly emphasize that Serbs should ask forgiveness for their past violence toward Albanians. One participant emphasized:

*I consider that they show kindness and in a way cleanse themselves because people can really forgive. Never heard a citizen from Miradi e Eperme of Serbian nationality asking forgiveness for what happened (Fidan, Albanian, male)*

While Albanian participants emphasize that Serbs should ask forgiveness, Serbian participants emphasize that both Albanians and Serbs should forgive each other:

*There is hatred between communities, as positive element would be the mutual forgiveness between Albanians and Serbs because bad things were committed by both sides (Aleks, Serbian, male)*

**Apology.** Closely related to forgiveness, while discussing the expectations of Albanian and Serbian groups toward each other during the dialogue meeting, one participant on behalf of the Albanian group said:

*We wish to receive an apology from the Serbs for the atrocities and crimes committed during the war in their name (Ditmir, Albanian, male)*

**Blaming the other.** A common reaction among the participants was blaming the other group for past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. For instance, one participant notes:

*The appearance of my ex-neighbors and mine, I got the impression that they look for someone to blame, but if we continue like this we will go to the second world war, which of course won't solve our actual problems (Petar, Serbian, male)*

During the discussions, it is also noticed that blaming has been expressed in the form of asking the question, like:

*But what happened why the Albanian houses were burnt whereas none of Serbs, during the conflict. And here's a big mystery, that still is not known who has burnt, but the information that I received from local Serbs tell me that the houses were burnt from local Serbs (Alban, Albanian, male)*

In a similar manner, another participant responded by blaming in the form of asking the question:

*It is true that many horrible things happened, but now we are in a time of peace. Now I am asking you where our properties are, where our houses are (Nikola, Serbian, male)*

*Collective responsibility.* A few Albanian participants also mentioned that Serbs shall take collective responsibility for past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. One participant emphasized:

*I want to say that we cannot avoid the responsibility and pretend that nothing happened since there was systematic robbery. The equipment has been carried by our vehicles, tractors because the refugees from Croatia haven't had vehicles to carry. Not to make long, what I want to say is that we cannot act like nothing happened (Alban, Albanian, male).*

Regarding the violence toward Serbs by Albanians, the participants responded by minimizing the consequences of wrongdoings, therefore denying responsibility for Albanian violence. For instance, one participant emphasized:

*We in the village have been chased out by violence from the village, all the goods that we have had in the families, in our village, we went out with a handbag. Our agricultural equipment has been robbed, everything just not the houses, our cattle, trucks and everything we had. Whereas these our friends have loaded their tractors and take them to Serbia. So we are robbed two times, our houses and wealth. No one chased them out, they left the village themselves (Driton, Albanian, male).*

While Albanian participants emphasized the responsibility by the outgroup, Serbian participants responded by emphasizing mutual side mistakes. One participant added:

*It is true that many horrible things happened, but now we are in a time of peace. Now I am asking you where our properties are, where our houses are. There have been mutual side mistakes, but the human damages are the worst (Nikola, Serbian, male)*

*Ingroup-shame.* To a lesser degree participants mentioned shame based on past ingroup violence. For instance, one participant said:

*A personal example, just after the war, in municipality an Albanian named xxx came. I was told that he does not want to say hello to anybody, but in the meantime, he came and greeted me. I asked him how is his father? He told me that he was killed by Serbs. I just walked away in shame. The next day he told me that he did not blame me for it and I said that I was sorry that my own ethnic group did that crime (Dejan, Serbian, male)*

## **Discussion**

This aim of this study was two-fold: first, what is rival groups' focus when discussing past intergroup violence; and second, what are people's reactions when engaging in discussion about past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. To investigate these issues, we analyzed the content of three structured dialogue meetings among Albanians and Serbs from Kosovo.

Our findings showed that people tend to focus on past outgroup violence toward the ingroup while undermining ingroup violence toward the outgroup. This means that groups in conflict emphasize mainly the period when ingroup suffered while neglecting the period when outgroup suffered as a result of ingroup violence. In our case, when discussing past intergroup violence, Albanians focus mainly on period 1998 and 1999 when their group has suffered, while Serbs focus on the period after 1999 when their group has suffered.

This analysis also showed that people are not ready to accept past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. The analysis indicated that people use different strategies in order to deny past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. For instance, one strategy to deny past ingroup violence toward the outgroup is

avoiding, in the form of forgetting the past ingroup violence toward the outgroup and focusing on the present issues. When not avoiding, people may justify past ingroup violence toward the outgroup in different forms. For instance, people either minimize consequences of in-group violence toward the outgroup or legitimize ingroup violent response in the form of self-defense.

Besides using various strategies to deny past ingroup violence toward the outgroup, people also ask from the outgroup members to seek forgiveness or apologize and take responsibility for the past ingroup violence. Past research shows that if people in the conflict show some degree of acknowledgment for past ingroup violence toward the outgroup, they also tend to feel ingroup shame or emphasize mutual intergroup violence events<sup>20</sup>. As a consequence, the prospects for reconciliation among groups increase.

There are two main limitations to the study. First, the study is based on three dialogue meetings between Albanian and Serbian participants. Because the study is based on three dialogue meetings, themes deriving from the data are limited with the small amount of data. Perhaps analyzing a greater number of dialogue meetings would make possible to discuss more in-depth the emerged themes such as forgiveness, blaming the outgroup, collective responsibility which are important elements of intergroup relations with a history of intergroup violence. Second, thematic analysis is mainly a descriptive analysis of the data, therefore, we cannot make claims about causal inferences in the study. Despite its limitations, the study provides useful information about what happens when rival groups discuss the past intergroup violence.

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<sup>20</sup> Cehajic and Brown, Not in my name: A social psychological study of antecedents and consequences of acknowledgment of ingroup atrocities (see footnote 11).

## **Conclusion**

In our research, we investigated the strategies of dealing with past intergroup conflict among the Albanian and Serbian sample. We found that both Albanians and Serbs tend to deny or justify past ingroup violence toward the outgroup. Forgiveness, apology, blaming the other, collective responsibility and ingroup shame, were themes that have emerged when Albanians and Serbs discussed past intergroup violence. Further research is required to understand the effects of such themes on intergroup relations.

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